

CREATIVE WRITING FOR THE BLIND

Jessie Whitney Mayshark

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Creative Writing for the Blind *copy 2*

By JESSIE WHITNEY MAYSHARK

*Instructor, Perkins Institute for the Blind,
Watertown, Massachusetts*

IF nothing more could be said of creative writing for the blind than that it provides constructive employment and comfort for otherwise empty hours, that alone would justify naming it as an art in which the blind may engage, if not distinguish themselves.

There is within most of us an indefinable something which calls for self-expression. For the seeing there are countless channels into which this creative force may be directed. But for the blind many — or most — of these courses are indisputably closed. Creative writing is a direction which this force may take. It may be that this creative energy will result only in a tiny stream at which the creator may refresh his own spirits and soul, but there is always the possibility that it may broaden and deepen and eventually become a river which shall water a thirsty land. The writer may always hope that this will be so.

Writing may be an absorbing interest which makes the life of a blind person significant, first, to himself and second, to others. Several years ago a little girl, Eleanor Gertrude Brown, entered the Ohio State School for the Blind. She had very little vision when she came to the school, and this little gradually decreased until, at the age of eleven, she had no sight at all. Added to the handicap of blindness, she was a sickly child, at times almost

paralyzed from attacks of St. Vitus dance.

When Eleanor was about eleven she became interested in a contest sponsored by a Columbus (Ohio) newspaper, which offered a prize of two dollars for the best short story written by a child under twelve. Eleanor entered the contest and won the prize. Her picture appeared in the paper with an account of her life at the school. This taste of accomplishment and recognition changed a shy, retiring child into a person who believed in herself and who resolved to build upon this first success.

After her graduation from the School for the Blind, Eleanor worked in a box factory to earn money for the State University. It was not easy persuading the University to accept her; it was not easy worrying through on insufficient funds and with poor health — but Eleanor managed. Her graduation from the University over, Eleanor was accepted as a teacher of history and languages in one of the Dayton high schools — not, however, without much misgiving on the part of the school authorities. Here, in addition to the difficulties common to all teachers, she was confronted with the further problem of proving, by more than ordinary success, that a blind person was capable of the work which had been entrusted to her.

Again the path was not an easy one;

that our liberal arts colleges provide so generously a creative opportunity of this nature for those of their students who may profit by it. It is no new departure but a steady growth from what has long been done. Our colleges have always made the high spirit of man their chief concern. The creative impulse is the noblest expression of that spirit and the rarest gift that man possesses, for, in its exercise, he is most himself and nearest to what

he ought to be. It is, therefore, in the best campus tradition that our colleges should hold out a hand to him who would write. It is worthwhile to train a thousand if thereby one true talent is helped. The evidence is accumulating that the gesture has not been in vain. The list of worthy craftsmen who have served their apprenticeships in writing courses is already an impressive one. It will grow longer as the years go by.

“There is no new poetry; but the new poet — if he carry the flame on further (and if not he is no new poet) — comes with a new note. And that new note it is that troubles the critical waters.”

—Thomas Hardy



the account of her experiences in the matter of school discipline, mechanics of teaching, domestic life is an epic of courage, but she surmounted every difficulty and then reached for the next rung in the ladder of success, which was a Master's degree from Columbia. This accomplished, she looked toward the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, selecting as the subject of her thesis, "Milton's Blindness." The understanding and sympathy which Miss Brown was able to bring to this task, coupled with the thoroughness of her research and labor, resulted in a volume which won enthusiastic recognition from Milton scholars, not only for her ability but for her achievement as well. But her contribution to literature, substantial though it is, cannot equal the blessing to Miss Brown's own life by this happy outlet for her creative energy.

In more than a few cases the writings of the blind have been a source of inspiration from which the seeing, as well as other blind persons, may take courage to battle valiantly, victoriously, against odds that at first seem unbearable. As a challenge to despair and compliance with failure, one should read, "I Begin Again," by Alice Bretz. Quite charmingly and with many touches of humor, Mrs. Bretz tells how she took up the business of living after two staggering calamities had befallen her — sudden blindness in adult life and shortly afterward the loss of a devoted husband. The reader admires the ingenuity with which she met situations which to the average person might seem inconsequential, but to the blind present vital problems. Determining the most efficient way of applying toothpaste to the brush! Inventing a system for

timing the process of toast-making! Capturing an elusive cake of soap in the bathtub? Other and more complex problems demanded solutions, too. How to go shopping, unattended! How to dine alone in a restaurant! How to entertain friends for tea without maid service!

The reader of "I Begin Again" feels that Mrs. Bretz, in spite of her tragic misfortune, has held fast through it all to her sense of humor and to that other precious faculty — the ability to enjoy life; she has maintained her dignity, her graciousness, and her zest for living in the face of one of the greatest afflictions which can overtake man and leave him with the obligation of still carrying on. One closes the book with this thought: I'd like to know Alice Bretz!

That she enjoyed writing this book is evidenced in Mrs. Bretz's words — "the time spent on the book was pleasant. It has been a diversion along my rough road."

Others among the blind have written inspiring accounts of their mastery over darkness. N. C. Hanks, distantly related to Abraham Lincoln's mother, in a little book called, "Up from the Hills," tells of the mine explosion which left him sightless and with both arms gone. How he learned to dress and feed himself, how he went to college, and later earned a living by lecturing is inspiring to read.

On the morning of August 12, 1893, Clarence Hawkes was a boy of fourteen, intensely interested in all phases of outdoor life and active, in spite of a previous injury to his foot, which had resulted in its amputation. On the eve of that day he was lying in bed, tortured with pain, his eyes bandaged; in consequence of a hunting ac-

cident from which total blindness finally resulted.

In his autobiography, "Hitting the Dark Trail," Mr. Hawkes says, "— that I have accomplished infinitely more because of what befell me on that terrible day I do not doubt." He is referring to the many volumes of animal and nature stories which he has written during his long lifetime. Out of the experiences of his own youth he has fashioned such tales as, "Shaggy Coat," Master Friskey," and "The Trail to the Woods," for other boys and girls. And in doing so he must have recaptured some of the joy and thrill of those earlier days, he must have rekindled some of those old, happy memories in his heart.

Like the quality of mercy, creative writing is twice blest; it may bless him who writes or him who reads. In the case of a blind writer — be his contribution great or small, be he a Milton or some mute, inglorious verse maker — it would seem that the benefit to him who writes must be greater than to him who reads.

To claim that writing is a pastime to which the blind may turn easily and

at will would be absurd. Like everything else they do, it demands of them greater powers of memory, concentration, and orderliness than is required of the seeing. The mere mechanics of writing present problems. There must be some dependence upon a seeing friend, or companion. Such questions as: Does my typewriter ribbon need changing? must be asked now and then from a person with sight. Miss Brown, when at work on "Milton's Blindness," came at one time to the point of despair over the confusion of her notes. From Mrs. Bretz's book we have an idea of the infinite patience with which she and a friend went over her manuscript, sentence by sentence, striving for better construction, more appropriate words and phrases; all these changes Mrs. Bretz would keep in mind, reorganizing her material again and again until it was finally to her liking.

There is a slogan which many of the blind adopt — "Others have done it; I can do it, too." It is so with writing. Many have already tried it and succeeded. The path is wide for others to follow.

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